

# **THEOLOGY IN THREE DIMENSIONS**

**A GUIDE TO TRIPERSPECTIVALISM  
AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE**

**JOHN M. FRAME**

"Clear and refreshing." — Wayne Grudem

“In spite of what many think, Jesus doesn’t command us in the Great Commission to teach people all that he commanded us. Instead, he commands us to teach people *to obey* all that he commanded us (Matt. 28:20). And there’s a big difference. With this difference in mind, John Frame presents us with an approach to understanding and teaching the Bible that has the goal of not merely transmitting truth from the teacher’s mind to the student’s mind, but also applying that truth to the student’s heart and life. As one of the foremost Christian philosophers and theologians of our day, Frame argues for us to think of theology not only as the accumulation and memorization of doctrinal ideas, but also as the practical application of those ideas to hearts and lives. He calls this approach *triperspectivalism*. Don’t let that term throw you. This is a God-centered method for interpreting and teaching the Bible that is deeply rooted in the triune nature of God as Lord and in Jesus as Christ, especially reflected in his three offices as Prophet, Priest, and King. Even though Frame has written much on this topic during his fifty years as a seminary professor, he has once again proved his commitment to help people apply the Bible and theology to real life through this concise and practical book. I know of no more God-honoring, life-transforming approach for understanding and teaching the Word of God than the one that John Frame presents in *Theology in Three Dimensions*. I highly recommend it and pray that God will use it around the world for the sake of the nations.”

—**Steve Childers**, President, Pathway Learning;  
Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Reformed  
Theological Seminary, Orlando

“*Theology in Three Dimensions* is practical, pastoral, and accessible. Need help making sense of what the Bible teaches about our God, our lives, and our world from a thoroughly

Trinitarian perspective? Are you looking for a handbook to Dr. Frame's triperspectival approach to theology? You've found it!"

—**Jim Fitzgerald**, Missionary to North Africa and the Middle East, Equipping Pastors International

"This book provides a clear and refreshing explanation of John Frame's insightful approach to studying the Bible (and everything else!) from three different 'perspectives.' It is the fruit of a lifetime of thinking and teaching about the inexhaustible splendor of God himself, God's Word, God's world, and us as creatures made in God's image."

—**Wayne Grudem**, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

"I commend this book as a short, useful, practical introduction to triperspectivalism. Frame introduces and explains in a clear way the main triads that he has used, especially the triad for lordship and the triad for ethics. He briefly shows their relation to the Trinity and the way they work in practice. The scope of the discussion makes the book an excellent introduction to the rest of his publications."

—**Vern S. Poythress**, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary

"It would be a theological treat to have in a single volume a summary of the chief contribution of arguably the world's leading English-speaking theologian. You hold that book in your hands. John M. Frame and Vern Poythress have written copiously about multiperspectivalism, an invaluable tool in interpreting God's revelation. It is an instance of genuine theological development in that it has no obvious precedent in church history, though, as Frame notes, it harmonizes neatly

with the Westminster Confession of Faith. In this book, Frame distills decades of careful Bible study and teaching in furnishing a remarkable key for understanding God’s revelation. This is one of those books that you can keep turning to in your life and ministry. The Bible is unchanged and unchanging, but our perspectives on it should deepen and mature over time. Frame shows what these perspectives are and how they work.”

—**P. Andrew Sandlin**, Founder and President, Center for Cultural Leadership

“Care. Despite the erudite riches contained in this work, what surfaces throughout is John Frame’s care and concern: care for God’s glory and for the church. Frame shatters the common notion that profundity and scholarship must be long, tedious, arcane, and impractical. The very structure of this work shows how triperspectivalism is really ‘theology as application,’ as Frame has insisted for decades—the crisp text, usable discussion questions, handy glossary, and additional resources make this work an accessible and ideal on ramp and gateway for exploring and habituating ‘what God’s Word requires me to do now,’ as John has often put it. Frame cares, and with this work, you can learn to cultivate real care for God, God’s creation, and God’s image, our neighbors—all to his glory.”

—**Jeffery J. Ventrella**, Senior Counsel, Senior Vice-President, Strategic Training, Alliance Defending Freedom

# THEOLOGY IN THREE DIMENSIONS

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JOHN M. FRAME



P U B L I S H I N G

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To Vern Poythress

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## FOREWORD

A SHORT, SIMPLE book calls for a short, simple foreword.

Why do so many lay Christians, let alone pastors and theologians, read Frame? Because he strives to be Christ-centered, clear, Bible-driven, humble, and balanced. That's why.

By Christ-centered, I mean that John Frame strives to exalt Christ above all—even above denominations and traditions. Jesus is Lord. He has supremacy in everything. The last paragraph of this book rings that bell loud and clear.

By clear, I mean Frame is a theologian who is accessible to both the trained and the untrained. He is a brilliant scholar, make no mistake about that. But he is read by a wide range of readers who don't get lost when he writes theology. Would that more theologians had this gift!

By Bible-grounded, I mean that he, as a Reformed theologian, is first and foremost a Bible guy. He wants to be faithful to Scripture. He loves the Word of God. He affirms its truthfulness and trustworthiness. He is driven to apply the Bible in everything.

By humble, I mean that both his person and his theological plan ooze with a winsome humility that draws people down that same path.

And by balanced, I mean that there is something spiritually holistic about his theological method.

Which brings me to *Theology in Three Dimensions*. One Saturday morning, after reading some of John's larger writings, I poked my head in his office (both of us are usually at work on Saturdays) and said something like "John, not everyone is going to read your thick theological volumes. I wish they would. But you should consider writing something brief, in book form, on triperspectivalism—something for the layperson. This is something that the church needs!"

Evidently, I wasn't the only person whispering in his ear. Here at last is John's response to our request.

*Theology in Three Dimensions* is an explanation of a God-centered perspectivalism. It's essentially a way of looking at things—a way of seeing. "Look at it this way," says John. And what he shows us is very helpful.

Now, don't let the word "triperspectivalism" scare you. Triperspectivalism is simply a teaching tool to help us grasp some of the deep things in Scripture. It highlights a pervasive pattern of threefold distinctions, or triads, in the Bible. These perspectives are helpful in knowing God and in knowing ourselves.

So without stealing his thunder, let me tell you why I have found this tool so helpful and needed in the church.

*Theology in Three Dimensions*, or triperspectivalism,

- Gives me a better knowledge of who God is and how he made us
- Helps me see beyond my own limitations
- Helps us become more teachable
- Is holistic—it speaks to all of who we are, and to all kinds of people
- Is faithfully creative, helping me see a deep pattern that, by God's design, is embedded in things

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- Helps me understand the Bible more deeply, knowing its great theme and how it relates to everything
- Helps me teach and preach the Bible more effectively
- Aids my understanding of church history
- Glorifies God and Jesus Christ by highlighting his lordship

Let me elaborate on just one of these, church history, since that is what I often teach.

John believes that this pedagogical tool could actually lead to some breakthroughs in our thinking. I believe he is right, because as I read church history and observe culture, I note that different eras tend to emphasize different dimensions of human nature. One era sees things this way. The next era often reacts against this. In reacting it sometimes even condemns the original action.

For example, take the so-called Enlightenment era that highlighted reason. In reaction to this emphasis on “reason alone,” the Romantic movement highlighted feeling and passion. And in reaction to the Romantic era, some European philosophers, such as Nietzsche and the existentialists, emphasized volition, or the will.

Who was right? Could all of them have been on to something important but missed other things because of their limited perspective?

This helps us understand how we can take a good thing, such as the intellect, the emotions, or the will, and overemphasize it. When we focus exclusively on one aspect of our human nature, there will inevitably be a counterreaction that resonates with some other aspect of our humanity.

This also helps me understand Christian ministries. For instance, I’m thinking about the prominent college ministries when I was a university student. Broadly speaking, some

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college ministries tended to emphasize the mind (InterVarsity), others the will (CRU and the Navigators), still others the emotions (charismatic fellowships). Students would often jump from one group to another when they sensed some yearning to balance out. This little example, I believe, is a microcosm of much of American and British evangelicalism.

Or apply this to the church and seminary world. Some have noted that in Reformed circles, people tend to fall into three groups—the “docts,” the “piets,” and the “Kuyyps.” The “docts” tend to prize precise doctrine above all, the “piets” (pietists) emphasize the heart and personal devotion, and the “Kuyyps” (Kuyperians) value cultural engagement and transformation.

But again, don’t we need all three? Knowing this can not only lessen the tension between these different “camps” but can also help us to avoid the temptation of lopsidedness.

I don’t believe John Frame’s teaching on triperspectivism is a fanciful speculation. To the contrary, John is on to something important. He is identifying some deep patterns built into the world by the Creator that are also reflected all over Scripture.

Frame is calling us all to a holistic vision represented in the Great Commandment itself, where we are to love the Lord our God with *all* that we are.

So let John Frame lead you in this little book—to a deeper faith, to a more whole-souled love for Christ, and to a greater appreciation for the diversity of the body of Christ.

Donald W. Sweeting  
Former president, Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando  
Current president, Colorado Christian University

# PREFACE

OVER MANY YEARS, with the invaluable collaboration of Vern Poythress, to whom I have dedicated this volume, I have argued the value of looking at theological issues from multiple perspectives, particularly a threefold set of perspectives related to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. People have often asked for a simple introduction to our “triperspectivalism.” Some introductory accounts of it do exist, particularly Poythress’s *Symphonic Theology*<sup>1</sup> and my “A Primer on Perspectivalism.”<sup>2</sup> Larger accounts include his *Philosophy, Science and the Sovereignty of God*,<sup>3</sup> my *DKG* and *PWG*, and some sections within our other books, especially his *Redeeming Philosophy*<sup>4</sup> and my *DG*.<sup>5</sup> I have used many triperspectival formulations in

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

2. John Frame, *SSW1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 3–18, cf. 19–25.

3. Vern S. Poythress, *Philosophy, Science and the Sovereignty of God* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).

4. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 53–134.

5. One appendix in *DG (A)*, 743–50 lists 112 threefold distinctions that can conceivably be interpreted triperspectivally—some, to be sure, with tongue in cheek.

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my four-volume *Theology of Lordship*<sup>6</sup> project and in my *ST*. But there seems to be demand for still another introductory work on triperspectivalism: a book under a hundred pages, explaining jargon, emphasizing practicality. That is the task I attempt here, summarizing and updating our past efforts.

Perspectival analyses of theological doctrines can appear very different from more traditional formulations, even those of confessions and creeds. For this reason, many readers worry that we are presenting something novel. I hope this volume will assure those and other readers that my writings and those of Poythress aim to represent and defend Reformed orthodoxy as it is classically presented in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Although our presentations and arguments are sometimes unusual, we almost always come to the same conclusions as those of the Reformed confessions: two routes to the same destination. Why two routes? I hope to show that in the present volume, especially chapter 8, “What to Do with Perspectives.”

Triperspectivalism is, in the main, a pedagogical approach, a way of teaching the Bible—that is, doing what theology is supposed to do. Beyond pedagogy, it may help us to get deeper into the doctrine of the Trinity in its implications for our thought and life. I’m sure that nobody thinks we have exhausted those implications in past theology.

I would not be writing this book except for the fact that many of my students and readers over a period of almost fifty years have expressed thanks for a method that has helped their Bible study and therefore has deepened their relationship with God.

My thanks to all who have helped with the publication of this work. My longtime friend John Hughes has again

6. That is, *DKG*, *DG*, *DCL*, and *DWG*.

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managed this project from manuscript to release. Thanks to P&R Publishing for accepting this project and for implementing their resources to make it available. Thanks especially to Andrew Buss for his excellent work in copyediting. Thanks also to Don Sweeting, president of Colorado Christian University, who first suggested the project to me.

There is much more to come. My friend Vern Poythress has developed this structure into outlines of the science of linguistics and other sciences. His forthcoming *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*<sup>7</sup> develops the Trinitarian basis of perspectivalism far more deeply than I have been able to do here. Others, like Timothy Miller and Brant Bosserman, are building on this foundation on the assumption that it will yield much fruit for future theology and other fields of study.

I think that at least this approach has the power to integrate a number of biblical teachings and to help us more effectively teach the Word of God. I pray that God will use these principles to make his Word better understood throughout the world.

7. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

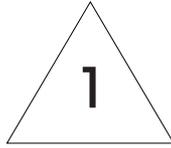


## ABBREVIATIONS

- DCL* John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, A Theology of Lordship, vol. 3 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
- DG* John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002)
- DKG* John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, A Theology of Lordship, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987)
- DWG* John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, A Theology of Lordship, vol. 4 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
- ET* John M. Frame, *The Escondido Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2011)
- HWPT* John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015)
- NT* New Testament

## Abbreviations

OT	Old Testament
PWG	John M. Frame, <i>Perspectives on the Word of God</i> (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999)
SSW1	John M. Frame, <i>Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. 1</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014)
SSW3	John M. Frame, <i>Selected Shorter Writings, Vol. 3</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2016)
ST	John M. Frame, <i>Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013)



## PERSPECTIVES

TO GIVE A detailed description of a tree, you really need to look at it from all sides. But of course, you can't see all sides at once. You may, therefore, need to do some walking. Your eyes won't be enough. But your eyes and your legs can combine to do a better job.

But even then your description won't be good enough for some purposes. For a *scientific* description, you will need some instruments: tools for a careful dissection, a powerful microscope. For a tree, ordinary as it may be, is a complicated thing. Think of all the veins in the leaves, the rings in the trunk. Think of how the tree brings sunlight, rain, and soil nutrients together to grow as it should. And then think of how each of these processes is itself complex. Today, we like to think that ultimately it reduces to protons and other tiny particles. To describe all of this, we need to look at the tree—not just from north, south, east, and west, but from a truly vast number of perspectives, external and internal.

And there is more. To gain a fuller perspective of the tree, we need to think about more than the tree itself. We also need to think about the tree's relationships with other things: the sun, the atmosphere, the weather, the insects, the bacteria,

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other trees, and the tree's history as indicated by its rings and the laws of chemistry, biology, and physics. We need to look at the human influence on the breeding of the tree through the centuries and the way this and similar trees have been used in human civilization. Each of these will lead us to indefinite numbers of additional perspectives, enlarging the knowledge available to our present perspective.

Trees appear in many famous artistic creations. They are part of many noted scenes, like the White House Christmas tree lighting and the California redwoods. They play significant roles in history, such as the battering rams used in medieval warfare. Often they take on symbolic significance, as the Tree of Life in the Bible, or the palms used to advertise sunny places. There are many trees we don't understand until we look far beyond their physical properties.

Vern Poythress defines "perspective" as "a view from somewhere. More precisely, it is a (1) view of something (2) by someone (3) from somewhere."<sup>1</sup> A *perspective*, literally, is a position from which a person sees something. It is the standpoint, the angle from which he looks. By extension, the term includes other sensory experience—hearing, taste, touch, and sight—as well as the activities we call reasoning. A person's perspective is the standpoint<sup>2</sup> from which he gains his overall understanding of the world around him. My personal perspective is what I sense around me at the moment when I am using my legs, scientific tools, and the like to get a fuller understanding. Ultimately, all this knowledge comes to me through my own body—through my senses and the

1. See Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

2. The Greek thinker Archimedes is quoted as saying "Give me a place to stand (a *pou sto*) and I shall move the earth." For Archimedes, the *pou sto* gives not only understanding but also power.

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operations by which my brain organizes my sense impressions into knowledge.

As we explore the tree in broader and broader contexts, more and more perspectives emerge. We consider the human influence on the breeding of the tree through the centuries and the way this and similar trees have been used in human civilization. Each of these will lead us to indefinite numbers of additional perspectives, enlarging the knowledge available to our present perspective.

So each perspective includes others. My sensory experience includes what I sense from far away as well as what I sense from close up. It includes what I can see from the north and from the south. It includes what I sense through the naked eye and through scientific instruments. These are multiple perspectives, but they all are part of the general personal perspective that constitutes my experience and assessment of the real world.

In one way each person's perspective includes the entire universe, though it is, in a different sense, a small part of the universe. When I stand at night, looking into the sky, I see billions of stars, planets, and other cosmic objects. I don't see them in detail or with absolute clarity. But my visual field has no end. The same is true when I look across the world, into the horizon. There is, again, no limit to my field of vision. I see everything that is visible from my position in space. In one sense I see everything, though not with perfect clarity.

But from another perspective(!) I judge my perspective to be very tiny. In comparison with other people, I know very little. And I am always aware of the limits of what I can perceive and what I can know.

When I meditate on the vastness, and the smallness, of human knowledge, it is natural to compare my knowledge to that of God.

## GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

This book deals with Christian theology, and so readers will understand that it presupposes the biblical God. God is the one who made this vastly and beautifully complicated world. Each tree displays his vast wisdom. Jesus said that God sees each sparrow fall (Matt. 10:29), and he knows the number of hairs on our heads (Matt. 10:30). Certainly he also knows every leaf on our tree, every root, every strip of bark.

To understand better the vastness of God's knowledge, we can compare it to our own, but also to the knowledge of animals. I have owned three Pembroke Welsh Corgis through my life, and they have been the smartest dogs alive. I taught them not only to sit, come, stand, and roll over, but also to turn to the right and turn to the left. I taught one of them to respond to dogs and cats on the TV screen (a lesson I eventually came to regret). I am sure that in a post-apocalyptic world a Welsh Corgi could find food for me and my wife better than I could. But my dogs always had one notable level of ignorance: they had no idea what I was writing in my books. They could not read even the first paragraphs of the introductions. Surely the comparison between my dogs' knowledge and my own is similar to the difference between my knowledge and God's. There are items of knowledge that are quite elementary to God that I have no idea of. People who use their reason to figure out the coherence of God's attributes and the reason for God's creation of evil would be like my dog if he had tried to master the first sentence in my *ST*. To his immense credit, he never tried to do that.

Theologians say that because God made everything and remembers what he has made, he is omniscient. But his knowledge includes not only the basic facts about the trees and the hairs and the sparrows. He sees all these things from

every possible *perspective*. He sees the sparrow from behind its head as well as in front of its face. And he sees my hair from its follicle to its ever decreasing pigment. He sees it from his omniscient divine perspective, but he also understands fully how my wife experiences my hair. And he is able to see it as anyone else sees it, from every possible vantage point. He knows what the sparrow looks like to another sparrow, or to the hawk soaring overhead. He sees my hair from the vantage point of the fly on the wall of my office. He even knows perspectives that are merely possible: he knows what my hair *would* look like from the vantage point of a fly on the wall, even when there is no fly on my wall. So God is not only omniscient but omniperspectival.

## INCORPORATING OTHER HUMAN PERSPECTIVES

As I sit in my office chair, I can look out the window, which conveys a splendid view of the seminary parking lot. That is, it gives me access to a perspective on the lot that comes to me essentially through my eyes. If I were to go outside, that perspective would be enriched by sounds, smells, and things I can touch, along with the intellectual reflections of my brain. That is all part of one perspective—*my* perspective, the perspective accessible by my own body. In one sense, I have only that one perspective on the world. Everything I know, I access through my body. And, as we sometimes say, I can't step outside my own skin.

But learning never ends with my immediate experience. I see George on the parking lot, and I ask him whether his five-year-old boy has recovered from his cold. He tells me yes, and I add that fact to my knowledge of the world. I don't *see* the child, and his health is not part of my *immediate* experience.

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But George is part of that, and I trust George's reports of his own immediate experience. So George's knowledge enriches mine. My perspective gets larger by incorporating George's perspective. So, though I cannot step outside my own skin, I can in some ways add the perspectives of others to my own. Of course, I don't trust everybody the way I trust George. And on some matters I might not even fully trust George. The expansion of my perspective is a *critical* task. I have to make judgments about whether and to what extent the perspectives of others are reliable, and to what extent their testimonies about their experience are true. But my critical thoughts are also part of my perspective on the world.

How do I make such judgments? What is the process that enables me to judge to what extent another's perspective is true? To a large extent our judgments in such matters begin with intuition. Some testimony, like George's testimony about his son, seems obviously true. George is a person like me. He has proved himself right in the past. I have not known him to deceive me or to be mistaken about something in his immediate experience. There is no problem with his. And there is the "ring of truth" in what he says. It fits together with the judgments I make about other aspects of my experience. These factors come together harmoniously. They are "intuitive." We just know, because we know what truth sounds like and looks like.

In other cases, however, there are questions to which the answers aren't obvious. Sabrina is a Democrat, and she tells me that we could give a free college education to everyone if we could tax millionaires and billionaires 90 percent of their income. That sounds dubious to me, for others have told me that even if government confiscates 100 percent of the income of the rich, it would not come near to the amount required. And even if this policy were effective, would it even then be fair to put a 90 percent tax on some people's income?

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In this case, I cannot just trust Sabrina as I could trust George. It isn't sufficient just to accept her perspective and add it to mine, as I did with George. Sabrina is not merely a set of sense organs that I could add to my own. Rather, she has done some thinking about reality from her own perspective, and she has added that thinking to what she considers her accumulated knowledge. But I cannot simply accept her testimony uncritically. I must make my own judgment.

So if I want to take up the question, I must do some research myself, or at least consult a greater number of authorities, in order to see if government can educate everybody by taxing the rich. But then I have to ask, what authorities are reliable? If Sabrina's ideas are not always reliable, where do I go to find the truth? I can read newspapers, books, and online material, but how do I judge, in each case, whether its testimony is reliable?

By my own intuition? In one sense, yes. Our judgments are our own. Again, we cannot step out of our own skin. But we all know that we, too, often make mistakes. If I judge that Sabrina's judgment is unreliable, I must admit that she may well have the same opinion of mine. Of course, both she and I must "use our own judgment." But that is tautological. That only means that we think what we think. It is not ground for claiming that the current contents of our minds are infallible, or even that they are better than someone else's. We often change our minds, deferring to someone who seems to have a better view than we have had up to now. We do not use our minds as static measuring sticks, rejecting every idea that disagrees with ours. At least we should not do this. We should be flexible enough so that occasionally we can learn something new, so that sometimes, at least, we can abandon old ideas and accept better ones, even better measuring sticks.

Knowing the world, then, is a complicated process in

constant change. It is a matter of interacting with our multitude of perspectives and with the perspectives of others, going here, then there.

But this sounds like we have no direction at all. We are like specks of dust, blowing in the wind, here and there, “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). Is there no map telling us where to go? Is there no method for making the right choices?

### ACCESS TO GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

The Bible teaches that God has granted us some access to his own perspective, the omniperspective, the perspective that includes and corrects all other perspectives. I say “some” access, not total access. Total access would mean that our mind is identical to God’s, and that cannot be. God is the creator, and we are the creature. The discrepancy is not only quantitative, that God knows all the facts and we only know some. Rather, it is qualitative, that God’s knowledge of every fact is different from our knowledge of the same fact. God knows, for example, that robins fly south in the winter; so do we. But God’s knowledge of that fact is very different from ours, in many ways. For one thing, God’s knowledge is original, ours derivative. God made the robins and equipped them to do what they do. The proposition, “robins fly south” is a proposition God has made to be true. When I say that robins fly south, I am stating something God has made to be true.

God’s knowledge, therefore, is the *criterion* of ours. Our beliefs are true insofar as they measure up to God’s. But God’s are always true, just because they are his. He is his own criterion, the ultimate test of his own thoughts. But our thoughts do not serve as their own criterion. That is to say, they are not *autonomous*.

But, given the qualitative difference between God's thoughts and ours, God nevertheless enables us to gain some of his knowledge, to affirm the same truths he affirms. And when we do, we are incorporating, to some extent, God's perspective into our own.

## REVELATION

Theologians use the term "revelation" to indicate the ways in which God enables us to incorporate his perspectives into ours. They distinguish:

(1) "General" or "natural" revelation, God revealing himself through the created world (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:18–21).

(2) "Special" revelation, God speaking human language to, and then through, prophets (Deut. 18:15–22), apostles (John 14:25), and the written text of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21).

(3) "Existential" revelation, God revealing himself through human beings as his "image" (Gen. 1:26–27). This includes his giving us ability to understand and apply other forms of revelation and therefore to develop our own sense of right and wrong (the "conscience," Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Tim. 1:5).<sup>3</sup>

In these ways, we gain *some* access to God's own perspective, as I described that access above. Much of the time, however, our knowledge of God's revelation is fragmentary and

3. I have discussed these various forms of revelation in *DWG* and in *ST*. "General" and "special" revelation are standard terms from the theological

## Perspectives

uncertain. For example, we learn by natural revelation that the earth's climate has changed over the years. But the role of man's actions in recent climate change is debatable. We learn by natural revelation that food nourishes the body and also that some substances are toxic to human health. But just what is nourishing, and what is toxic, and in what quantities? These are subjects about which there is much disagreement. Over the years the consensus of human research has changed, and sometimes changed back again.

Even beliefs that some claim are based on the Bible are not always absolutely certain. Some people believe that Jesus expelled the money-changers from the temple at the beginning of his ministry (suggested by John 2:13–17). Others believe that he did this toward the end (suggested by Matt. 21:12–17). Many believe he did it twice, others that either Matthew or John reported this event out of chronological order. None of these views is immediately obvious or certain.

But there are some teachings of Scripture that are so clear and/or pervasive that nobody can question them. Scripture clearly teaches that there is one God, that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, that Jesus died for sinners and rose again, and that God promises salvation from sin to those who trust in Jesus' sacrifice and embrace him as Lord.

So God grants us certainty of the Bible's teaching, in many cases, by its sheer obviousness. But there is also a supernatural factor. Paul says to the congregation of a church he had planted, "Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction"

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literature. "Existential" revelation is not, but is unique with me, so far as I know. I try to explain the reason for using a threefold, rather than merely twofold, division in these previous writings. Those who read the present book to its conclusion will also understand my preference for a threefold distinction.

(1 Thess. 1:5). That is, God sent his Holy Spirit to change the minds of these hearers, so that they would come to believe, and believe with assurance (see also 1 Thess. 2:13).

When that happens—that is, when God through our natural powers and the Spirit’s supernatural influence convinces us that a certain belief is warranted by God’s own speech—then God authorizes us to believe it with certainty, with assurance.<sup>4</sup> That means that there are certain propositions, such as “Christ died for sinners” that we can state on the authority of God himself. Like the prophets, we may preface these by saying “Thus says the Lord,” or “This is what God says.” In these cases, we can be certain that we have accessed God’s own perspective on the truth, his omniperspective, which includes all other perspectives.

But, again, we do not have such certainty about everything. Humility and wisdom require us to distinguish when we have certainty and when we don’t. And when we are uncertain, we should be eager to benefit from the perspectives of others—especially the omniperspective of God but also the limited perspectives of our fellow human beings made in God’s image. The way to knowledge and certainty is the way of seeking additional perspectives, deeper perspectives.

## PERSPECTIVES WITHIN PERSPECTIVES

We have seen that God’s omniperspective is a complexity. It includes many perspectives within it. It includes the perspective of the fly on my office wall watching me type this manuscript, as well as all other possible and actual perspectives. There is something similar in our own thinking, which images that of God. In the image of God’s omniperspectivalism, the

4. See my essay “Certainty,” found as appendix A in *HWPT*, 582–88.

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perspective of each human being incorporates perspectives from other human beings (like George and Sabrina) and from God. Even our knowledge of other perspectives is perspectival. When God considers the perspective of the fly on my office wall, he may well consider that perspective from my perspective, as I take notice of the fly and watch its progress from the top of the wall to the middle. I may consider Sabrina's politics, part of her perspective, from the perspective of, say, Charles Krauthammer, a political commentator. Or Krauthammer's perspective from Sabrina's. In human thought, as in God's, there are perspectives on perspectives on perspectives. Our thinking images God's even in its complexity.

This is one way in which God has made the world a unity. Everything can be understood from the perspective of everything else.

### FOR REVIEW AND REFLECTION

1. Frame has mentioned perspectives relevant to the study of a tree. Suggest what perspectives might be relevant to the study of gravity. Of the history of Sweden. Of ethical methodology.
2. In one of these studies, show how some perspectives include others.
3. "People who use their reason to figure out the coherence of God's attributes . . . would be like my dog if he had tried to master the first sentence in my *ST*." Explain, evaluate.
4. How do you feel about God's omniperspectival knowledge? Is it a threat? A comfort? Hint: look at Psalm 139.
5. Have you ever gained knowledge that you considered intuitive? Describe how it differed from other knowledge.

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6. Should we advise young people to “use your own judgment?” What qualifications should we put on that exhortation, if any?
7. Do we have access to God’s perspective? How can we, given that his knowledge is omniperspectival? Discuss.
8. God’s knowledge is the *criterion* of ours. Explain, evaluate.
9. “But there are some teachings of Scripture that are so clear and/or pervasive that nobody can question them.” Explain, evaluate. If there are such teachings, give some examples.

## GLOSSARY

**autonomous.** Thinking or acting without accepting any standard from outside ourselves.

**criterion.** A standard for judging the nature of something or the truth of a statement.

**intuitive.** Known by a process difficult to identify or describe.

**omniperspectival.** God’s omniscience, understood as his ability to understand everything from every possible perspective.

**omniscience.** God’s attribute of knowing everything.

**perspective.** A view of something by someone from somewhere.

***pou sto.*** A place to stand (Archimedes). The starting point of an inquiry or endeavor, which gives insight and power.

**qualitative difference.** A difference in kind, not just quantity. One way to indicate the vastness of the difference between God’s thoughts and our own.

**revelation.** Knowledge given by a source outside ourselves, particularly by God. See definitions in text of “general,” “special,” and “existential” revelation.

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**ring of truth.** Our ability to judge the truth of a statement by way of our God-given intuition of what truth sounds like.

### FOR FURTHER READING

John Frame, *DKG*. This was my first published book. It develops an epistemology (theory of knowledge) from the Bible and incorporates the concept of perspectives.

Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Poythress's first exposition of the idea of theology done from multiple perspectives.

**J**ohn Frame gives us an accessible introduction to “triper-  
spectival” study—where theological issues are fruitfully  
viewed from multiple perspectives without compromise  
to their unity and truth.

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“A clear and refreshing explanation of John Frame’s  
insightful approach to studying the Bible (and everything else!)  
from three different ‘perspectives.’ It is the fruit of a  
lifetime of thinking and teaching.”

—**WAYNE GRUEM**, *Research Professor of Theology  
and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary*

“As one of the foremost Christian philosophers and theologians  
of our day, Frame argues for us to think of theology not only as  
the accumulation and memorization of doctrinal ideas, but also  
as the practical application of those ideas to hearts and lives.”

—**STEVE CHILDERS**, *President, Pathway Learning*

“Frame shatters the common notion that profundity and  
scholarship must be long, tedious, arcane, and impractical. . . .  
The crisp text, usable discussion questions, handy glossary, and  
additional resources make this work an accessible gateway  
for exploring and habituating ‘what God’s Word  
requires me to do now.’”

—**JEFFERY J. VENTRELLA**, *Senior Counsel, Senior Vice-President,  
Strategic Training, Alliance Defending Freedom*

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